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ABSTRACT

Whole language, a theory of language instruction that was developed primarily in terms of helping children learn to read, has now been extended to middle- and secondary-school levels. Andragogy, the learning of adults, is a specific theory of adult education, conceived in contradistinction to pedagogy, the teaching of children. When these two universes of educational discourse are juxtaposed, however, the commonplaces of whole language and of andragogy as instructional theories are similar, if not identical. What began on one side as a theory about children learning to read, and on the other side as a theory about adults learning as adults, may be seen to coalesce in a statement about humans learning. In whole language students learn to read by reading whole pieces of enjoyable literature (authentic and meaningful texts) and maintaining the natural wholeness of language. The teacher in a whole language classroom is seen as a facilitator or demonstrator--an active participant in the learning community. Andragogical learning is also self-directed in the learner. The learner's own experiences are used as a rich resource for learning. In both environments, learning is focused within the context of the learner's world of reference, and the teacher is not the only source of truth. Learning becomes a collaborative transaction in which all work together, reading authentic/whole literature, producing individual real/authentic texts. (Contains 68 references.) (NKA)

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Whole Language and Adult Education: A Juxtaposition of Two Universes of Discourse

by Warren Lewis

"Whole Language" (WL), a theory of language instruction that was developed primarily in terms of helping young children learn to read, has now been extended to middle- and secondary-school levels. *Andragogy*, "the learning of adults," is a specific theory of adult education, conceived more or less in contradistinction to *pedagogy*, "the teaching of children." When one juxtaposes these two universes of educational discourse, however, one finds that the commonplaces of WL and of andragogy as theories of instruction are, *mutatis mutandis*, similar, if not identical. "In both fields the same debates rage about the whole language aproach versus the word recognition, decoding, or phonics approach," as well. (Sticht & McDonald, 1992: 315) Recognition of this parallel of theories has arisen relatively recently, although work done by the National Reading Project could be said to have been moving in this direction for 20 years, and many of Kazemek's articles, published in the '80s, are premissed on an equivalent insight. What began on the one side as a theory about children learning to read, and on the other side as a theory about adults learning as adults, may be seen to coalesce in a statement about humans learning.

David Kring, reflecting on Constance Weaver's WL approach to reading process and practice (1988), observed the similarities between WL and adult education and commented: "As the discussion turns to WL in the text, I almost feel as though it is a discussion of Adult Ed. foundations....As we discuss the problems of a failing education system for the children, perhaps we might ask how we could teach children using adult ed methodologies; but, then, it appears that WL may already have achieved this!" (D. Kring, private communication 2 Nov 1994).

The message of this paper is that WL theorists and andragogues have much to say to one another and to learn from one another.

What is Whole Language?

According to its advocates (cf. Brockman, 1994; Smith, 1994; Strickland & Strickland, 1993), WL is a *new paradigm* of progressivist instruction in continuity with Rousseau's romantic naturalism, John Dewey's democratic pragmatism, Jean Piaget's observation that children learn on their own, and Lev Vygotsky's and others' social constructivism collaborative interaction in learning. Among other aspects, WL involves *transactional* models of teaching (as opposed to *transmission* or *banking* (Freire)) and learning (interaction with text and language, collaboration with co-learners, engagement for learning on account of *real* reasons).

Students learn to read by reading whole pieces of enjoyable literature and maintaining the *natural* wholeness of language (as opposed to prepackaged worksheets, skill-and-drill behaviorist approaches, and the abecedarian dismemberment of language and text wherein phonetics is the primary method). Student-centered learning (as opposed to scripted curricula imposed by authorities from outside of the classroom) takes place

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as students construct their own meaning of the world around them (as opposed to memorization or imitation or reproduction of the teacher's knowledge); learning is risk-taking, exploratory, welcoming of the potential in errors for new learning.

The text focus is on *authentic* and *meaningful* texts (student-produced texts, as in the *language experience* method; *invented spelling*; self-published texts; and *context-specific* texts of high interest with immediate application to young readers' lives). Learning to read is reading for the sake of comprehension, with *real purposes* in mind, and learning to write is writing for *real audiences*; learning to read and write is integrated with simultaneous (as opposed to sequential) learning in other disciplines in *across-the-curriculum* fashion and in context with the development of other abilities (reading-and-writing to learn; listening and speaking as part of reading and writing; language learning in terms of other *content areas*).

The teacher in a WL classroom is seen as a facilitator, demonstrator, and co-reader, an active participant in the learning community, who *teaches students* rather than *teaching subject matter* and who watches for *teachable moments* of student readiness to learn. Assessment in the WL classroom takes place collaboratively and individually as students evaluate themselves and others, guided by, and in communication with, their instructor, for the purpose of adding to the learning experience and measure growth (as opposed to supplying authorities and other stakeholders with statistics).

What is Andragogy?

An unfamiliar word even to most professional educators, *andragogy* as a theory of adult education is, nevertheless, represented in over 300 entries in the ERIC database; it is most often associated with the name of Malcolm Knowles, who did not invent the term but did bring it into currency. (cf. Houle, 1992) Towards the conclusion of his public career, Knowles summarized andragogy as follows:

> The theoretical presuppositions of andragogy are that andragogical learning is increasingly self-directed in the learner. The learner's own experiences are used as a rich resource for learning by self and other learners. Readiness to learn arises from life's tasks and problems. The andragogical orientation to learning is task- or problem-centered. Motivation is the adult learner's own internal incentives and curiosity.
>
> The procedural elements of andragogy include a climate of relaxed, trusting, informal, warm, mutually respectful, and collaborative support. Planning, diagnosis of needs, and setting of objectives, while designed primarily by the teacher, are carried out by both teacher and learners through mutual assessment, mutual negotiation, and learning contracts and projects sequenced by the learner's readiness. Learning activities include inquiry projects, independent study, and experiential techniques. Evaluation is based on learner-collected evidence, validated by peers and facilitators, the latter being

expert in applying criterion-referenced norms. (Knowles, 1993; see also Davenport & Davenport, 1985.)

The two universes of discourse are one.

Andragogues and WL advocates alike will nod in mutual recognition to read the respective descriptions of their two camps, above, and they will assent to the assertion that both WL and andragogy concur in the following: Self-directed learning (Brookfield, 1985; Grow, 1991), the sense that the learner's interests and needs, abilities and styles of learning are controlling the learning experience (as opposed to the teacher and the learning experience controlling the learner) is of uppermost importance. David Caverly corrects rhetorical excess on both sides to say that neither andragogy nor WL is wholly "self-directed," but that both are, in a Vygotskian constructivist sense, "learning communities" in which the teacher/expert "guides but does not limit" the learning of the student/novice (whether adult or child), and "both novice and expert grow and learn" and the goals of both are realized. (Caverly, private communication, 19 June 1994)

In both environments, learning is focused within the context of the learner's world of reference in terms of the learner's own needs, interests, desires, aesthetics, and social-political aspirations (as opposed to "covering a curriculum" or studying only what the teacher dictates as important to be learned). Adults, when they have not been infantilized by returning to the school room, demand that their learning be according to their own agenda, and this means that the teacher as facilitator must be co-responsive, rather than autocratic, in negotiating the syllabus and planning the work. WL advocates know that children have their preferred agendas, too, and that good teachers take these into account when planning the curriculum.

In the andragogical classroom, adult students learn as much from one another as they do from the teacher, and they tend to nod off if the teacher lectures for too long. In both classrooms, small group discourse multiplies the learning conversations and the communication of knowledge, giving voice to more people than the teacher only. Children and adults alike love to express themselves, and this many-sided discourse continues in the response and commentary of written dialogue journals. Although children have shorter lives upon which to draw, they, too, learn from one another's life experiences, multiple perspectives, respective knowledges; what they bring to their reading is as important as what they take from their reading.

In both the WL and the andragogical classroom, the teacher is not the only source of truth. Real-world reading material is brought to class by students, whether newspapers and forms from work by adults or favorite kiddie-lit storybooks by children, and learning becomes participation in "the literacy club." In this way, the *natural* language and interests of those who do not necessarily share in the "culture of power" of the literate elite, gain at least equal time in the hierarchy of the classroom. Learning becomes a collaborative transaction in which all work together, reading real-

life/authentic/whole literature, producing one's own real/authentic texts, as a part of making up one's own meaning with a little help from one's friends.

WL theorists and andragogues alike recommend the reading of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), to make the pedagogy of children more andragogical, and to keep the andragogy of adults from being oppressive. The net result is that education becomes *transformative*. (Mezirow, 1991)

Specific examples

Teachers whose students are adults, such as ESL teachers, ABE teachers, prison and jail educators, and workplace trainers, have, naturally, been among the first to see the match between WL theory and its andragogical applications. Educators of typical prisoners have observed, for example, the galvinizing impact of whole literature on the incarcerated, prompting strong, existential responses, engaging them in literacy learning that contributes to their moral development. (Cioffi, 1980; Hruska, 1981) The National Family Literacy Center in Kentucky, for another example, makes use of WL as an ideal means to teach literacy to adults and to children at the same time in the same family.

Perhaps, therefore, the best way to grasp the compatibility of WL and adult education as andragogy is to sample applications of theory and method in specific circumstances. To do this, see the following: Gilles *et al.* (1988) have developed WL strategies for teaching secondary students, and so have done Strickland & Strickland (1993), as well as for post-secondary students. Kroeker & Henrichs (1993) and Gaer & Holt (1993, 1994) have applied WL strategies to the English-literacy instruction of adults, and Soifer et al. (1990) used WL theory to identify an educational structure to meet the needs of adult learners in an ongoing workplace literacy program in the automotive industry. Also in workplace literacy training, see McBride et al. (1992) (1992), Johnson et al. (1992), and Caverly et al. (1992). Literacy Volunteers of America, in TUTOR (7th. edition), applied WL to adult literacy tutorial, and New Readers Press lists a whole page of "whole language publications" in their catalogue (p. 54). Marek (1989) recommended the use of evaluation as a WL approach instructing adults in reading. Many ESL teachers use WL theory to inform their teaching of English to learners of all ages. TESLFF-L, "Whole Language and Fluency First," is a sub-list of TESL-L, the electronic and international network of ESL teachers; on TESLFF-L, teachers compare notes about using WL methods to teach their adult ESL students. (To sign-on to TESLFF-L, you must first subscribe to TESL-L@CUNY.EDU [or @CUNYVM.BITNET]).

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